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# French-Canadian literature

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# French-Canadian literature

by Laurent Mailhot

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#### *Note about the author*

Laurent Mailhot is a professor in the Department of French Studies at the University of Montreal, where he has taught since 1963. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Grenoble, France, with a thesis on Albert Camus. He has been a visiting professor at the Universities of Toronto and Ottawa and an instructor at the University of Paris-VII. He is editor of the magazine *Études françaises* and of the "Lignes québécoises" collection published by the University of Montreal Press, and is author of the following publications:

- *Le Théâtre québécois*, I and II (in collaboration with Jean-Cléo Godin), Montreal, Hurtubise HMH, 1970 and 1980.
- *Albert Camus ou l'Imagination du désert*, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1973.
- *La littérature québécoise*, Paris, PUF, coll. "Que sais-je", 1974.
- *Anthologie d'Arthur Buies*, Montreal, Hurtubise HMH, 1978.
- *Le Québec en textes, 1940-1980* (in collaboration with Gérard Boismenu and Jacques Rouillard), Montreal, Boréal Express, 1980.
- *Monologues québécois 1890-1980* (in collaboration with Doris-Michel Montpetit) Montreal, Leméac, 1980.
- *La Poésie québécoise, anthologie des origines à nos jours* (in collaboration with Pierre Nepveu), Quebec and Montreal, PUQ/L'Hexagone, 1981.

*Note* — Reference Series No. 46 covers Canadian English literature

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Is there in fact a single Canadian literature in French? Actually there are several, distinct from one another in time, space and the cultural background from which they spring. The writings of New France<sup>1</sup> are very closely related to the European classics. The works of the nineteenth century are primarily sociological, ideological and historical documents. Acadian<sup>2</sup> literature is quite distinct from contemporary Quebec literature, and there are still other groups and well-known names spread over the country as far as the prairies.<sup>3</sup>

The body of French-Canadian literature is rich and varied. It is a living organism that moves, feeds, spreads and contracts. From the Renaissance to the present it has assimilated writers who were born in France, the United States, Haiti and elsewhere. By general agreement, *Maria Chapdelaine* although written by a French writer belongs to French-Canadian literature, as does *La Forêt* (1935) by Georges Bugnet, an immigrant to Alberta. The seventeenth century *Relations des jésuites* contain elements of American Indian mythology, whereas the ethnologist Marius Barbeau has produced a tragic epic from the legends and rituals of the Tsimshian Indians of British Columbia, *Le Rêve de Kamalmouk*,<sup>4</sup> considered by some to be the finest literary work Canada has produced.

### *French colonial period*

Throughout the French colonial period (1608-1760)<sup>5</sup>, the discoverers, explorers, missionaries and visitors, such as the famous explorer and navigator Bougainville, wrote letters, accounts, memoirs, sermons and treaties which, having outlived their immediate diplomatic, administrative or propagandistic purpose, live on with increasing vitality as literature, consulted for pleasure and perused for interest. The best of them have acquired with advancing age the flavour of youth, despite the attempts of the publishers of deluxe editions to petrify them as national monuments. Contemporary writers such as Savard, Perrault and Vigneault, weave the fabric of their stories in their poems from the threads borrowed from the accounts of voyages attributed to Jacques Cartier.

Is it necessary to search for the sources of French-Canadian literature in the reports of bishops and governors, Sulpicians and Jesuits, and

generals such as Montcalm and Lévis? One can choose between the seven thousand letters of the mystic Marie de l'Incarnation<sup>6</sup> and the worldly, romanesque correspondence between Madame Bégon and her son-in-law, a government official in Louisiana. One can compare the description of the "products and customs" of the colony sent to Colbert by Pierre Boucher in 1664 with the naive and delightful Recollet Sagard's *Grand Voyage au pays des Hurons* (1632). One can recreate discussions between the Jesuits and the Baron de Lahontan, who cast himself with an Indian chief for an adversary in his famous *Dialogues*, a supplement to his largely imaginary *Voyages* and the critical and philosophical *Mémoires*, which retained their influence throughout the eighteenth century on Voltaire, Diderot, Swift and even into the era of Chateaubriand.

Following the French defeat in 1759, there is a hiatus until 1791,<sup>7</sup> when a legislative assembly was established, and 1806, when the newspaper *Le Canadien* was founded (and quickly became the spokesman of the Opposition), reviving the intellectual life that had been interrupted by the return to France of the elite of the colony.<sup>8</sup> The French Revolution and the Emperor Napoleon worried the British authorities and the Church, even though widespread illiteracy thwarted the ready access of the farmers of Lower Canada to the new ideas of liberty, reason and progress. The passions of their overseas cousins were distilled for them by the aristocratic Voltarian romantic, Louis-Joseph Papineau, a legendary figure of parliamentary and popular eloquence.

Armed with documents in support of his theses, the national historian François-Xavier Garneau added form and style to the ideas of Papineau (and Lamennais and Michelet) on the sovereignty of the people. His *Histoire du Canada*, written as a reply to Lord Durham's *Report* of the Rebellion of 1837-38, is a seminal work, which inspired poets as well as orators and journalists.

### *Nineteenth century work*

Until roughly 1860, these men dominated the world of ideas and publishing. At this point the ultra-conservative clerical party,<sup>9</sup> led by the Bishop of Montreal, Mgr Bourget, wrested control from the *Institut canadien* and its *rouges*, the liberal democratic faction. Arthur Buies, who had received his training in Paris, was one of few who continued the struggle. His *Lettres sur le Canada* is a fine pamphlet, while his *Lanterne* unfortunately passed into obscurity more quickly than that of Rochefort. In his *L'avenir du peuple canadien-français*, written in 1896, Edmond de Nevers claimed that the future of his people lay in the arts, in scholarship

and in towns where history was preserved as in a museum. Throughout the nineteenth century, the message that is preached is one of survival, nostalgia, the past. For the French-Canadian elite of the time, the golden age lay shrouded in the mists of history, in the *true France*, (perhaps of the Middle Ages) in the eternal city of Rome, in classical Greece.

The tranquility of this arid academic humanism is rarely disturbed by the novel or by poetry. Literary production is to a large extent merely reproduction, a faithful echo of official morality and tenets: the virtues of rural life, messianism, puritanism. There is a succession of historical novels and stories of rural life which are at best epigonal. Lyric poetry is either excessively pathetic or plaintive, draped in either a banner or a winding-sheet, redolent of either the bugle or the death-knell. Fréchette, a disciple of Hugo, plays in a major key: Crémazie, more self-critical, in a minor one.

### *Folklore*

The insipidity of the official genres is fortunately overshadowed by the oral tradition and folklore, enriched by interminable winter evenings in the family circle: the families are the villages, and *vice versa*. Fables, legends and stories compensate for the almost total lack of novels (with the exception of *La Terre paternelle*, under a variety of titles) between *L'Influence d'un livre*, a fantastic tale of the supernatural written by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé the younger in 1837, and *Angéline de Montbrun*, a psychological novel by Laure Conan, which appeared in 1881.

From 1860 on, the upper classes began to be aware of the potential of the popular tradition. The elderly nobleman Aubert de Gaspé the elder evokes the romanticized history of *Les Anciens Canadiens*. Dr. Joseph-Charles Taché draws his material from *Forestiers et voyageurs*. Fréchette, who was elected to parliament, paints an authentic picture of the times in his *Originaux et détraqués*. Arthur Buies, who in addition to being a journalist was an accomplished writer, filled his *Chroniques* with verve and spirit.

Another author who was unaware of her own qualities is young Henriette Dessaules, who kept a diary, *Journal*, of her adolescence from 1874 to 1880, although this fine work was not published until 1971. Her contemporary, Eudore Evanturel, published a collection of verse, *Premières poésies*, which unfortunately remained without a sequel. His subtle rhythms and ironic, disillusioned tone, somewhere between Musset's plays and Baudelaire's prose poems, stand out in sharp contrast to the didactic pomposity of the fashionable lyric of the day.

### *Nelligan's poems*

Emile Nelligan was to go much farther than Evanturel. A poet in the Rimbaud mould, he suffered a tragic fate and went insane at the age of 20 after a period of intense and vital production. He had assimilated the essential aspects of the Parnassian school, of Romantic sensibility, symbolism and decadence. "The pathetic element in Nelligan's poems is derived perhaps from the fact that they are so literary, while at the same time creating the impression of being almost living things. . . . Nelligan's greatness lies in his having discovered on his own the path to universality."<sup>10</sup> Nelligan, the only great poet of the Montreal school — a movement that was important from several points of view in providing encouragement and attracting attention — is far removed from the official ethical and aesthetic positions. His poem *Clair de lune intellectuel* has no trace of the descriptive or the pittoresque:

Ma pensée est couleur de lumières lointaines,  
Du fond de quelque crypte aux vagues profondeurs.  
Elle a parfois l'éclat des subtiles verdures  
D'un golfe ou le soleil abaisse ses antennes.  
(My thought is the colour of distant lights,  
from the obscure depths of an anonymous crypt.  
Sometimes it flashes with the subtle greens  
Of a bay in which the sun's rays sink.)

His *Soir d'hiver* is even more sparse and pure:

Ah! comme la neige a neigé!  
Ma vitre est un jardin de givre.  
Ah! comme la neige a neigé!  
Qu'est-ce que le spasme de vivre  
A tout l'ennui que j'ai, que j'ai!...  
(Ah! how the snow has snowed!  
My window-pane is a garden of hoar-frost.  
Ah! how the snow has snowed!  
What is the spasm of living  
Against all the boredom I feel, I feel!...)

Nelligan does not translate ideas: he does not put feelings to music: with few exceptions, he writes. He has been criticized for his "cult of the word", as was the novelist Réjean Ducharme in a later era and who assimilated Nelligan (both his work and the myth) into his own text. The young poet of 1899, struck down "on the threshold of his Twenties", is regarded as the "first representative of the modern age in Quebec". "The relationship to language changes; as the poet regards it no longer merely as a means of communication, but as the facet that shapes the subject matter itself. It is the words which think and speak it, hence the attention to the phonic form and the latent meaning of speech."<sup>11</sup>

### *Free verse*

It was, however, to take several decades before the new poetry presupposed and heralded by Nelligan's writings was firmly established. Free verse was introduced into Quebec in 1920 by Albert Dreux (*Le mauvais Passant*) and Jean Aubert Loranger, a remarkable prose poet and storyteller. The movement received its greatest impetus from Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, another very young poet (he was only 31 when he died). His *Regards et jeux dans l'espace* (1937) brings together a simple vocabulary based on geometric images, syntactical disarticulation, a questioning of the fundamentals of life, death, the word and silence.

Anne Hébert, a cousin of Garneau, reflects the same rigour and the same obsessive themes: the closed room, the reduction to a skeleton. She undergoes an authentic descent into the underworld (*Le Tombeau des rois*) and a triumphant re-emergence into the light (*Mystère de la parole*). The world-traveller Alain Grandbois, has a more supple, fuller touch; he uses nautical, cosmic rhythms, and the star of his *L'Étoile pourpre* is that of a heart and a world wounded by war, separation and exile. Rina Lanier, the fourth of the "founding fathers" of Quebec poetry, is biblical in scope, reminiscent of Claudel. She explores *La Malemer*, and portrays the "accursed figtree" and the tree of the cross (*L'Arbre blanc*) from the desert of mystical love.

### *The novels*

The traditional tendentious French-Canadian novel reaches its apogee in Louis Hémon's international bestseller *Maria Chapdelaine*, which in the 1930s found numerous imitators, successors and critics, such as *Menaud, maître-draveur* by the Abbé Savard, a poetic, patriotic fable haunted by the sermonizing "voices" of Maria. Works such as Claude-Henri Grignon's excessively exploited peasant story *Un homme et son péché*, which has been reincarnated on the radio, in film and on television, or Léo-Paul Desrosiers' rigorous historical and geographical novel *Les Engagés du Grand-Portage*, are set in the Manichean aftermath of *Maria Chapdelaine* but lack its formal beauty. The novel *La Scouine* by Albert Laberge, a journalist who also wrote naturalistic short stories in the style of Maupassant, is more violent, blacker but incomplete. Germaine Guèvremont, on the other hand, offers in *Le Survenant* supple prose, relaxed landscapes in which sky and water blend with the trees and agriculture finally cedes precedence to adventure.

The urban novels such as Roger Lemelin's *Au pied de la pente douce* (1944) and Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) have remained

classics. The former, together with its sequel *Les Plouffe*, was remade as a film after having had an enormous success on television. The latter, which was awarded the *prix Fémina* in Paris, has been edited and analyzed from every angle. These works, popular frescoes, naive paintings, melodramas (in the eyes of some), suddenly put Quebec City and Montreal on the map of society's imagination. Behind the Balzacian heroes, hungry young wolves on the prowl, swarms a people on the move, in transition. The rural parishes are slowly changing into neighbourhoods in a capital city and in a metropolis that are themselves gradually emerging from the grip of the conservative clerical ideology known as "Duplessisme", after the Quebec provincial premier of the time.

### *Periodicals*

There was a remarkable upsurge of publishing, magazines and criticism during the 1930s. While the Abbé Groulx, the second "national" historian, spoke from every rostrum and inspired a variety of rightist movements, small groups of young people founded, bought, read and sought their own solutions in such periodicals as *Les Idées*, *Vivre*, *La Relève*, *Gants du ciel*, *Amérique français*. Perhaps the best-known is *Cité libre*, founded in 1951 by two intellectuals, Pierre-Elliott Trudeau and Gérard Pelletier, who later became respectively prime minister of Canada and Canadian ambassador to France.

The Second World War gave Canada and Quebec international horizons. Jacques Ferron recalls that "far from having a detrimental effect on what was French here, the fall of France stimulated it". It stimulated information, publishing and creative activity in general. Illustrious visitors and lecturers, from André Breton to Saint-Exupéry, passed through Montreal, the Laurentians and the Gaspé. Père Couturier came from New York to talk about painting with Borduas and his friends, whose 1948 manifesto *Refus global* brought the artists out of the "plastic village". Henceforth official dogma was undermined in public by the poets of the Hexagone, a publishing house founded by Gaston Miron in 1953, intellectuals and other creators, on Radio-Canada, the state-owned broadcasting network, and in the newspaper *Le Devoir* and some university faculties: the anachronistic regime of Duplessis began to be shaken.

### *"Poetry of the country"*

The nationalism based on conservatism and survival yielded to the reforms of the "Quiet Revolution" in the early 1960s, on the one hand, and to separation on the other. The magazine *Parti pris* and a variety of other

movements soon added separationism to secularism and socialism on their mastheads, applying more or less wholesale to Quebec the theories of decolonization. The ferment was everywhere, in the public service, the media and the universities.

The so-called “poetry of the country”, which could with equal justification have been called poetry of the shout, of the word, of the fullsome silence, fulfilled an extraordinary role at the time:

nous te ferons, Terre de Québec  
lit des résurrections  
et des mille fulgurances de nos métamorphoses  
(we shall make of you, soil of Quebec  
a bed of resurrections,  
source of the thousand lightning bolts of our metamorphoses)

proclaims Gaston Miron with magnificent assurance in his inflammatory *l'October*. Giguère's *Âge de la parole* replied to Préfontaine's *Pays sans parole* and Paul Chamberland followed the epic lyricism of *Terre Québec* with the self-criticism, doubt and violent despair of *L'Afficheur hurle*. Other poets, less visibly “committed”, wrote notable sequels that constitute approval of the time (*Mémoire* by Jacques Brault) and space (*Arbres* by Paul-Marie Lapointe).

### *Golden age of the novel*

The novel experienced its golden age about 1965-66, with the simultaneous appearance of Marie-Claire Blais' *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (which was awarded the *Prix Medicis*), Jacques Godbout's *Le Couteau sur la table*, Jacques Ferron's *La Nuit*, the first volume of a fantastic trilogy, Gérard Bessette's *l'Incubation* (very much a ‘new novel’) and above all Aquin and Ducharme, who were acclaimed as revelations and geniuses.

Bessette, a professor and psychological critic, and Godbout, a filmmaker and animator, practise all forms of narrative, but more from the standpoint of brilliant intellectuals than of creators. Blais parodies the rural novel, with the clichés of innumerable children and murderous cycles, but her *Saison* belongs in the category of “grotesque realism”. Ferron, an excellent story-teller, like Yves Theriault (*Agaguk, Ashini*) and Roch Carrier (*La Guerre, yes sir!*) occupies a position at the meeting-point of oral and written literature, of myth and history. The characters lurk on the fringes of society, often native Indians (down to the rural beggars and urban “winos”) who redesign the world and begin to live again thanks to the initiatory power of the word. These attitudes reappear in the stories and monologues of the Acadian, Antonine Maillet.

## *Hubert Aquin*

The culmination of Hubert Aquin's career as a novelist is *Prochain épisode*. The novel is characterized by carefully thought-out movements, well-defined plans of action (espionage, love, politics, culture), lively tempo and impeccable style. Where Ferron spoke of an "uncertain" country, Aquin writes: "Our history will not begin until that uncertain moment when the revolutionary war begins." Does this mean "never"? The revolution is always in the future, at the end, far off, after the contemporary "episodes" of the "story" which contains both the intrigue of the plot and the historical political background. "I don't write, I am written," declares the novelist-hero transported from Switzerland to Quebec, from drownings in Lake Constance to ascents toward alpine peaks, with side trips into the Ottawa Valley and the Eastern Townships. *Prochain épisode* is a utopian compendium and a radical questioning. "We have to name everything, write everything before we blow everything up; you have to spell everything out in order to know everything, and call the revolution by name before making it," states the novelist in *Trou de mémoire*. He called it by its name until his death by suicide in 1977.

Young Réjean Ducharme substitutes a sort of verbal and existential anarchy for Aquin's revolutionary violence and baroque aesthetics. His pacifism is, however, no less lucid, aggressive and desperate for all that. He also strives constantly for the gleam of dawn after the dark of night, for the eternally elusive episode that will make sense of the derisory words and gestures. Until then, Ducharme pursues his dream in *Enfantômes*, *l'Hiver de force*, *Le Nez qui voque*, questioning the meaning of the "equivocal funeral" that is life, and specifically adult life in society. Alongside his prose and drama (parodical), Réjean Ducharme has also written excellent songs (for singer Robert Charlebois) and the screenplays for the most recent films by Francis Mankiewicz.

## *Drama*

With the appearance of *Belles-soeurs* in 1968, the drama replaced the novel in the spotlight of public attention. Theatre in Quebec was slow to develop and virtually non-existent prior to the appearance of *Les Fridolino-nades* and *Tit-Coq* (1948) by Gratien Gélinas, followed by the social and romantic dramas of Marcel Dubé, in which young people — unemployed, delinquents, sons of wealthy fathers — play a key role. *Zone*, the international repertoire performed in Montreal by *Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent*, which was founded in 1937, and subsequently by the *Théâtre du Nouveau Monde*, *Les Apprentis-Sorciers*, *Les Saltimbanques*, helped to develop a new and more demanding audience.

Michel Tremblay, Jean-Claude Germain, Jean Barbeau and the majority of contemporary Quebec playwrights have succeeded in articulating the popular or folklore tradition of revues, monologues, holiday entertainment, with the most provocative and modern staging. Tremblay's *Belles-soeurs* is a play without intrigue, without male characters, based on flashbacks, broken hearts, a disjointed language (*joual*,<sup>12</sup> the lowest level of language, riddled with anglicisms, but nevertheless warm and dramatic). Women, homosexuals, derelicts and others on the fringes of society invade the stage which has hitherto been the preserve of the upper class. *Agit-prop*<sup>13</sup> groups go out into the streets and factories to carry their message to the people. At the close of the 1970s, theatre returned to the cafes, small auditoriums and schools, while the magazine *Jeu* reported on the diverse facets of this activity.

### *Essays*

Another genre which has undergone considerable development in Quebec over the past two decades is the polymorphous one of the essay. *Les Insolences du Frère Untel* was a best seller in 1960. Jean Marcel's *Le Joual de Trois* went much farther in 1973. Among historians such as Brunet and Frégault and other representatives of the humanities such as the sociologists Fernand Dumont, Jean-Charles Falardeau and Marcel Rioux, there emerged a number of specialists capable of embracing the world of (social) fantasy and freedom in their writings. Dumont's *La Vigile du Québec* or *Les Québécois* by Rioux are essays in which the literary aspect is added to the political dimension.

Literary criticism first appeared in the newspapers and periodicals, but some 15 years ago Jean Éthier-Blais and Gilles Marcotte themselves abandoned *Le Devoir* and *La Presse* (newspapers) for university teaching. Research and creation are interwoven and cross-fertilize each other in such *avant-garde* periodicals as *La (Nouvelle) Barre du jour*, which is almost a "school", as is the collection of *Herbes rouges* for poetry. Nicole Brossard and François Charron represent, although they do not dominate, this dual movement of modernity and of preoccupation with the text itself.

The sheer pleasure in story-telling persists and has experienced a revival in the hands of writers such as Jacques Poulin (*Les Grandes Marées*), Louis Caron (*L'Emmitouflé*) and the prolific Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, who are far more influenced by American writers than by Parisian periodicals. Beaulieu in particular has derived from his fascination with Melville a superb "reading-fiction", which is autobiographical, self-critical and fantastic. "What I look for in Melville," he has written, "is what

I cannot find in myself, a calamitous life, the fabulous failure. But I have never begun: I am like my country, I am no more than the half-measure of my country...."

Which country? Which (common) measure? Space and countries vary from one writer to another and from one age to another. Gabrielle Roy, who had lived in Quebec for the past 40 years, came originally from the prairies. Her works have long alternated between novels (urban, set in Montreal) and short stories (set in rural Manitoba). One of her most recent books, and the most moving, *Ces enfants de ma vie*, evokes the experience (lived, dreamed about and written about) of a school teacher in the West surrounded by a small microcosm of races. On the East Coast, Antonine Maillet, an Acadian who lives in Montreal, was awarded the *prix Goncourt* in 1979 for *Pélagie-la-Charette*, which tells of the odyssey of a deportee returning home two centuries ago from the south to the north of the North American continent.<sup>14</sup> Other young writers, from Ontario or New Brunswick (Herménégilde Chiasson: *Mourir à Scoudouc*) perceive the necessity of a literary language through the linguistic confusion around them.

The literary and cultural question remains tied to the political question, even though it transcends it. Writers are there so that words and things change and interchange. When André Brochu and Gilles Marcotte, one a separatist, the other a federalist, discuss *La littérature et le reste*,<sup>15</sup> they speak the same language and occupy the same space, even though they do not share the same ideology. Literature, like the country, is always there to invent anew.

## Footnotes

- 1 The name given to the French possessions in Canada in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- 2 The Acadians are the descendants of the first French settlers in "Acadia", a name applied originally only to present-day Nova Scotia but which now includes part of the province of New Brunswick as well.
- 3 The provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.
- 4 Montreal, Fides, 1948 (Nénuphar collection). The first version of this ethnographic and poetic "novel" was first published in English: *The Downfall of Temlaham*, Toronto. Macmillan, 1928.
- 5 By the Treaty of Paris (1763) New France was ceded to Britain.
- 6 A French nun and missionary who founded and served as the Mother Superior of the first Ursuline convent.
- 7 In 1791 the colony was divided into two parts, Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec), each of which had its own legislative assembly.
- 8 Following the conquest of New France by Britain, two-thirds of the ruling class either returned to France or settled in the West Indies or Louisiana.
- 9 The "Ultramontains", who defended the traditional French, Catholic positions against a tide of secularism.
- 10 Georges-André Vachon, "L'ère du silence et l'âge de la parole", *Études françaises* (Montreal) 3: August 3, 1967, p. 319.
- 11 Jacques Michon, "La poétique d'Émile Nelligan", *Revue des sciences humaines* (Lille) 173, 1979-1, p. 35.
- 12 Concerning this question, cf. the article by Lise Gauvin, "Littérature et langue parlée au Québec", *Études françaises* (Montreal) 10:1, March 1974, pp. 79-119.
- 13 A form of theatre with its roots in the Russian revolution of 1917 which combines agitation and propaganda in plays whose purpose is strictly political (e.g. to mobilize the workers during a strike, etc.)
- 14 The Acadians, who were distrusted by the British settlers because of their refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown, were deported from Nova Scotia to other British colonies, and in particular to Louisiana.
- 15 This epistolary novel was published in Montreal, Éditions Quinze, in the collection "Prose exacte", 1980.

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